



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MERCURY

A Fact Sheet for Protecting Young Visitors To Your Home

By making your home safe from mercury spills you can protect children visiting your home, or living there in the future, from exposure to hazardous mercury vapors.

Why is mercury now a problem when we played with it years ago?

We know more about mercury now than we did then. We now know that mercury is hazardous – it's a powerful neurotoxin (a toxin that destroys nerves or nervous tissue). It is especially harmful to the brain development of children under six years of age and pregnant women because of its effects on the brain of the developing fetus. Most people played with small amounts of it when they were older than this and were not as susceptible to injury.

How is someone exposed to mercury?

When mercury is exposed to the air, it gives off a vapor that can't be seen, smelled or tasted. Breathing this vapor puts mercury into your body.

Where is mercury found in the home?

A small amount of mercury, about a gram, is found in fever thermometers. Thermostats that control your furnace can contain three or four times that amount. Sometimes people have bottles or jars of mercury saved from work or hobbies. Older devices for measuring blood pressure in the home can contain half a pound of mercury. Some antiques, such as pendulum clocks, mirrors and barometers, can contain large amounts of mercury.

How can I make my home safe from mercury contamination?

The first step is to look for the objects mentioned above, even if you think you no longer have any of them. If you find them, seal them in two plastic bags - one inside the other - for double protection from a spill. Then call your local health department and ask how to safely dispose of it. Replace older thermometers,

blood pressure cuffs, thermostats or other items with newer ones that do not contain mercury.

If I spilled mercury and my home got contaminated, how difficult or expensive is it to clean up?

You can usually manage small spills, such as one from a broken thermometer. Large spills (those that equal or exceed one pound or two tablespoons) require professional assistance and can cost thousands of dollars. A typical larger spill results in the removal and disposal of throw rugs, carpet, padding, furniture and more. For instructions on how to clean up a mercury spill call your county health department.

How long can mercury vapors stay around after a spill?

This is hard to predict because it depends upon the amount of mercury spilled, the temperature of the room, the amount of fresh air coming in, and the size of the beads into which the mercury has been broken. If mercury beads are present they will continue to give off vapor until they have completely changed into a vapor. This can take anywhere from a few weeks to more than a year.

What are the symptoms of mercury poisoning?

People that inhale concentrated mercury vapor for a short period of time may initially experience chest tightness, fever, weakness, upset stomach or swollen gums, and nerve damage and kidney failure at a later time. Longer exposure to mercury can result in personality changes, decreased vision or hearing, peripheral nerve damage, high blood pressure or kidney damage.

Where can I get more information?

Contact the Michigan Department of Community Health at (517) 335-8350 or 1-800-648-6942 or your local health department.

